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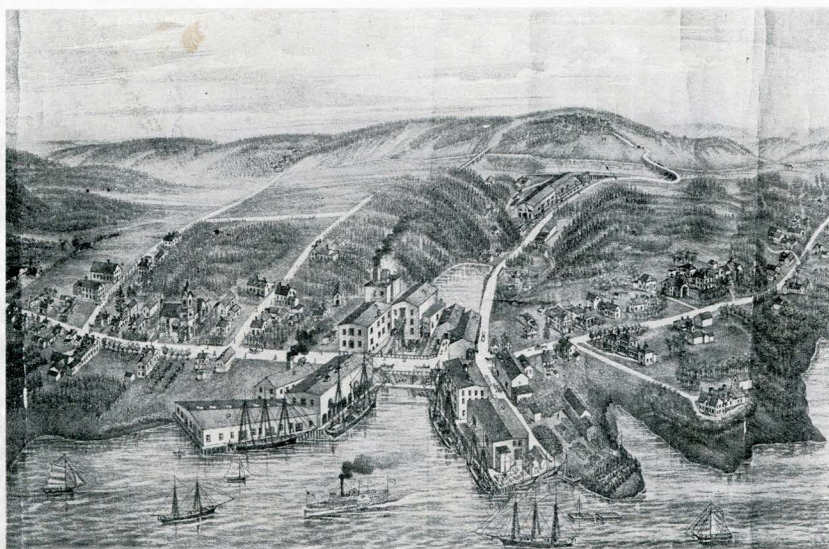
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Plaster and Granite Industries at the Red Beach Industrial Port in Calais, Maine

by
MARY ROSS LANE

Plaster and Granite Industries at the Red Beach Industrial Port in Calais, Maine

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Background

I chose the Red Beach Plaster Mill as the topic for a class assignment I prepared for my English teacher, Mr. Richard Groves, when I was a freshman at Calais Memorial High School in 1955. I obtained the information from Arthur Cook, a native of Red Beach and a mate seafarer. Mr. Cook lived to a grand old age, retained his mental faculties, and is buried in the Red Beach Cemetery. Mr. Cook gave me details on how the plaster industry worked.

Over 25 years later, in 1982, I revisited this work and included additional information about the Industrial Port and the Granite Company, information that I obtained from various sources including The Calais Advertiser. This gives a more complete accounting of the industrial era in Red Beach.

My childhood memories are filled with summer days spent scrambling about the old wharves fishing for flounders on the incoming tide. We youngsters prowled through the ruins at times, but I never knew for sure where any of the buildings were except for the general store.

I was always told that at one time the population of Red Beach was greater than that of Calais. I was also told that most people never saw their pay, but took it in trade.

Today there is little trace of the wharves and the highway has dramatically changed the appearance of the cove. For that reason, I wanted to share what I knew about Mill Cove so that others may know more about this history and so that the details given by Mr. Arthur Cook will not be lost.

-Mary Ross Lane, 2019

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Red Beach Industrial Port

Have you ever heard that Red Beach was once a busier seaport than Calais? So have said some of the old timers who remember when Red Beach was the hub of flourishing granite and plaster industries. Unfortunately, this cannot be found in history books, nor can it be found in any book at the Calais Free Library.

During its heyday the Red Beach Granite Company employed 400 men while the Red Beach Plaster Company employed another 300. There were subsidiary businesses which employed additional numbers of people.

At this time, the late 1800s, both companies were mainly owned by Charles H. Newton who also owned the large general store within the complex of the plaster mill buildings. Most employees took their pay in trade at the store.

As was common in those times, power for the mills was obtained by damming a stream. In this instance it was the Beaver Lake stream. Nash's Lake was dammed at its natural outlet so that a canal dug from Nash's Lake to Beaver Lake stream would provide additional water flow for the mills' power supply. The Nash's Lake dam exists today, though the canal no longer functions.

The Granite Company

In 1901 the State of Maine ranked first in the nation in terms of the value of granite produced. There were nearly 200 granite companies along the Maine coast.

Maine's best red granite came from Red Beach. There was one main quarry that employed approximately 400 men at its peak, but several others also operated in the area. To hoist and move the pieces of granite, a huge derrick was built over the area to be quarried. Holes were drilled and blasted to free the pieces of stone. Teams of oxen, later, horses, moved the rough-hewn pieces to the sheds where they were chipped-in-the-rough, cut and polished, then transferred to the wharves for shipping. The granite mill itself was immense, all enclosed. The mill, cutting sheds, and polishing sheds were along the Mill Road close to the quarries.

Men were employed as quarrymen, teamsters, stone cutters, and polishers. Granite work was extremely hazardous resulting in injuries, fatal accidents, and many deaths attributable to “stone cutters consumption.” Other men were employed as seamen to transport the cargo on sailing vessels.

Not much is known about the beginnings and demise of the local granite industry. It is known that in the 1890s Scotch red granite was causing competition; eventually an increased tariff was placed on imported stone. Unions throughout the state battled to shorten the work day and improve wages; later they worked to lessen the health hazards. During difficult times the Red Beach company was hampered by distance and competition from large firms.

It would be nice to know where some of the Red Beach granite was taken and what buildings were constructed of it. The pillars at Boston's South Station are told to be of beautiful Red Beach granite. It is believed that the soldiers' monument in the Calais park came from the black granite of the Beaver Lake quarry. The milestones marking the ten miles from Calais to Red Beach are unpolished red granite as is the old landmark “the watering trough” once familiar at the entrance to the Carson Road, but now seen at the Pike's Woods picnic area. Many, many tombstones in local cemeteries are of Red Beach granite.

The Plaster Mill

The late Arthur Cook of Red Beach has left us with what may be the only record of plaster-making in Red Beach. Mr. Cook was a mate on sailing vessels that exported the finished plaster products.

The Red Beach Plaster Company was built in 1847 by a man named Bergen. Incorporated in 1857, the stockholders were Charles H. Newton, George R. Tarbox, and Frederic A. Pike. Samuel H. Nickerson and B. F. Kelly became members of the company in 1892. By 1900 the Red Beach Plaster Company was owned by George E. Newton, son of Charles, and B. F. King of Newark, N.J.

The mill was supplied with raw plaster rock mined from various operations in Windsor, Cheverie, Walden and Noel in Nova Scotia as

well as Hillsboro, New Brunswick. In some places, the rock was dug with shovels and picks from deposits two or three feet below the ground. At other locations, rock was mined from outcroppings found on cliffs or hillsides.

The company owned several ships that provided for the transport of the raw materials from the mines to Red Beach. Vessels that went by the names of "Swallow," "Lark," "Bell Hardy," "Mary Lee Newton," "Rocky Mountain," and "William Cobb" were among the fleet that would first sail upriver to Calais to cross through customs before unloading at Red Beach.

While the scale of the ships allowed for a lot of material to be moved at once, it also created logistical problems when unloading materials at the mill. The ships were so large that their bows reached over the road when pulled in close to the docks. Men who worked at the mill told stories about an accident where the boom on one of the ships swung around hard and crashed through the wall of an office near the docks, leaving a large hole in the building.

Workers would unload the rock into small track cars which they pushed by hand to the crusher where the rock was ground-up into smaller pieces. From the crusher, the rock was elevated to the second story of the plaster shed and then to the boilers.

The mill had two boilers that heated the mixture to approximately 220 degrees in a process, called calcining, that used heat to generate a chemical reaction to further refine the materials. Once calcinated, the plaster was run off, cooled, barreled and sent to the storehouse ready for shipment to ports on the Atlantic coast.

Three types of plaster were manufactured - regular plaster for building purposes, blue plaster for fertilizer, and fine plaster for Plaster of Paris and dental work. The fine plaster had to be sifted through yards of silk, such a slow process that crews worked all night to sift enough to ship out the following day. At its peak the company processed 100,000 barrels of plaster during a year.

The ships loaded as much as possible at high tide in near the docks. As the tide receded they moved the ships out into the river and

used scows to load them. The plaster was shipped to Norfolk and Richmond, Virginia; Baltimore, Maryland; Washington, D.C. and the far south.

The mill facilities included as many as 10 different buildings: the plaster mill, rock plaster shed, calcining work, storehouse, plaster shed, cooper shop, stave mill, stave shed, and hoop shed.

Barrels for shipping were made in the cooper shop. Imported staves were soaked in water until they could be bent into shape for the barrels; hoops were also imported. Tops and bottoms for the barrels were made at the saw mill which was also owned by the company.

At the height of prosperity, the plaster company employed 300 men. Workers labored for nine hours a day for an average of \$1.00 per-day. At the age of 16, most boys started working, receiving wages of \$.75 per-day. The pay increased the longer a person worked, but it never went over \$1.25 a day.

The business flourished for many years, but had started to fade as new building materials gained favor. The mill was destroyed by fire caused from a spark from a piece of equipment in 1926. Many of the original homes that were built in that area have also disappeared in subsequent years. To find the site now known as Plaster Mill Cove, look in Red Beach (south section of Calais) for the large sign "Saint Croix National Monument" which marks the historic settlement of Champlain and DeMonts on St. Croix Island in 1604. There, along the edges of the cove, you may see some remains of the old wharves from which tons of granite and plaster were transported. These remnants are a deteriorating reminder of a productive past.

About the Cover Image

Red Beach, Maine, Historic Aerial Sketch - An image scanned from a black and white postcard depicting an aerial sketch of Red Beach in Washington County, Maine. Undated. Seen are the many buildings along the shoreline of the Red Beach plaster industry, The Company Store, and upstream behind them the Maine Red Granite Polishing Works. One of several quarries in the area is in the background. Image courtesy of Special Collections, Raymond H. Fogler Library.